

Statement made by Leslyn McBean-Clairborne upon being elected Chair of the Legislature for 2020:

“Thanks everyone for selecting me as your Chair. Thanks to Mike Lane for his graciousness in this moment. Mike has been a friend and constant supporter of mine over the years. Thanks to my friend, Mike Sigler for serving us well as Temporary Chair. Thanks to County Clerk, Maureen, for doing the heavy lift when we were stuck. Thanks to Shawna for stepping up and holding us down. Most importantly, I want to thank the staff who kept the business of county government going smoothly even when we were fumbling on the one.

“The one question that I was repeatedly asked in considering this run for Chair of the Legislature was “Why now?” My response “Why not now?” A response more to myself than to anyone else. For years I doubted my time and ability to do this as well as whether I would be supported for this leadership role. I felt and noticed that there was not the predominant will of the body to support this role of Chair with someone who has a full-time career. Additionally, in case you hadn’t noticed, I am a Black woman and no matter how excellent I am, I am never good enough and the overlook happens. So why put myself through that was the other question I answered for myself. As confident as I am in much else that I do, with those factors occupying my thinking, I found this decision to be particularly intimidating (note, there is not much that intimidates me). Although I still had my own doubts, the last two years began to present newer possibilities for me. I took careful stock of some of the positive changes - 50% of the Legislature were women; about 50% held progressive values; there was a 100% increase in Legislators who held full-time jobs and reported to someone else; and there was a 50% increase in Legislators who had young children. I was in good company and not feeling like the only one with those issues to take into consideration. Couple that with the wave of women, people of color, LGBTQ+ citizens and other protected groups being elected to office nationally, and the possibilities for me seemed reachable. So when the opportunity presented itself again and many of you asked me to consider it, I took it as a sign that it was time. Yesterday, we at GIAC had the privilege of hosting for lunch and conversation, Yusef Salaam of the exonerated 5 formerly the Central Park 5. One of the things he said that resonated with me was we have to, “own our stories and not be afraid to share them.” I realized in that moment that for the last two weeks, I have been owning my truth and fears and being vulnerable in sharing them as I arrived at this decision to run for Chair. Even so, it took a lot of time for me to do due diligence with my employers, family, co-workers and others to ensure that me running for Legislature Chair would not have any adverse impact and that I have their support.

“I want to give thanks to the late City Alderwoman, Diann Sams, who encouraged me to get involved in community, to get on local boards and committees, and to consider running for office. To my colleagues here, tonight I appreciate profoundly your vote of confidence and humbly accept your decision to select me as your Chair of this esteemed body. It tells me and others out there looking to serve that we are not colorblind and that we can embrace a career-minded, working-family person to serve on this body and even become its leader. My family is my heart. My husband, J.R. Clairborne and my children, Kelsey, Indira and my son who is in prison, have been my rock, supporting and pushing me. I could not do the things that I have done; could not do this without them holding me up. Thanks family.

“I have mad respect for all of you and look forward to your continued support, and to working with our incredibly talented and brilliant staff to represent and meet the needs of the people of Tompkins County. I am super excited to work with whomever is chosen as Vice Chair to put in place a committee structure and other assignments that take into consideration that people occupying those assignments have other life priorities and none of these assignments should be burdensome to them; for us to move forward with a lot of the progressive actions we have taken and are yet to take, and to be a role model for other elected

leadership bodies. I don't know it all but what I do know is that each of us bring unique skills, talents and expertise to the issues we tackle as policy-makers and we have to trust that and each other to move forward cohesively. My agenda can be found in this quote from one of my favorite politicians, "If I have anything special that makes me 'influential,' I simply don't know how to define it. If I knew the ingredients, I would bottle them, package them and sell them, because I want everyone to be able to work together in a spirit of cooperation and compromise and accommodation without, you know, any caving in or anyone being woefully violated personally or in terms of their principles." She went on to say, "A spirit of harmony can only survive if each of us remembers, when bitterness and self-interest seem to prevail, that we share a common destiny." Barbara Jordan, US Congresswoman from Texas, 1972-1978. First woman, let alone Black woman to be elected in her own right to serve as a representative from Texas. Thank you."